



CHAPTER I.

round the house the wind was shrieking with mournful vehemence, now and then flinging great drops of rain against the window panes. The moon, which half an hour before was shining with exquisite clarity, now lay hidden behind banks of heavy clouds; and the fitful gusts of that swept round corners and mountained the pine branches betwixen a before the morning, while up from a came the sad monotonous roar of waves as they thundered against the rocks.

There is thunder in the air," said Lady Mary, looking up thoughtfully. Lady Mary looked older than she really was; but her face was still beautiful in its years of trouble and ill-health. She was tall, stately woman with severely aristocratic features and the distinguished air which cannot be acquired. She was knitting placidly. Occasionally she raised her head to cast a glance of unaffected tenderness upon a lad of about ten who was bending over a book at a table near her. He was Lady Mary's nephew, the son of her dead brother, and the last of his name. In him this youthful ear—all her hopes were centered; and she lavished upon him a mother's love—she who had never been a mother.

A changed expression passed over her face as the storm developed. On such a night as this her brother, Lord Wriothley, the father of the lad before her, had been thrown from his horse and brought home to the Towers lifeless. On such a night two long years back her true love, to whom she was to have been married on that day week, was drowned off St. David's Head. Alas, for such storms as these! They boded no good to the old race to which she belonged, and which seemed to be now fast drawing to its close.

"What a night!" said Lady Mary, with a nervous start. "I like it," said the lad, holding his head erect, as though enjoying the warfare without. "What a sea there must be on to-night!"

He pushed back his chair and walked toward the window nearest to him. Half way across the room, however, he came to a standstill. His face turned pale, and his eyes were an eager, strained expression, as though he were listening for something. At the same moment Lady Mary cried out abruptly:

"What was that?" she, too, started, and now moved nearer to the boy. Her tall figure was drawn up to its full height; her fine eyes shone brightly. All the petty tremors that had shaken her a few minutes before were now gone, having given place to a sudden feeling of strength and courage. She stood calm and self-possessed, although anxious.

Above the storm they had heard a shrill, wild cry, which even now, though faint and distant, was strong enough to pierce the riotous war of the gale and the dash of the rain drops upon the gravel walk. It was the cry of a child in sore distress. It sounded more plaintive and every moment, but it seemed to be nearer to the house.

Summon the servants: it is some poor creature in distress!" cried Lady Mary, with a rapid movement toward the bell. "No, no; I will go myself," said the boy, taking to the window that opened on to long balcony.

"In this storm, Fulke—in this rain! Oh, no, darling," she entreated; but he was not listening to her. Lord Wriothley pulled open the casement with a vigorous hand, and there, shivering in the darkness, stood a forlorn looking little thing that made Lady Mary and her nephew shiver.

It was a child—a mere babe. The cloak that had been wrapped round it had fallen away, and now the pretty, rounded, uplifted arms were wet with the rain. The soft yellow locks that should have been some mother's tenderest pride were tangled and wet. The small face looked ghastly, and great tears fell from the little blue eyes, while quivering sobs came from her lips.

The next violent gust of wind dashed the poor little wet against the side of the open window. The tiny baby hands clutched convulsively at the wood work; but no cry escaped her lips then. Her mouth seemed gone.

"It is a child—a child!" cried Lady Mary, in a compassionate tone, hurrying to the window. The little one, however, had caught sight of Wriothley, and held out her arms to him. As he knelt eagerly to her and carried her into the warm room, she turned to him affectionately, and uttered a faint sigh of relief that went straight to the boy's heart.

The little wet arms clasped his neck, a frightened face was pressed against his shoulder. She was too young to reason; but she knew that she was safe—she was with friends. The rain no longer daunted her; the howling wind ceased to drag at her cloak, and, better than else, the awful darkness was gone.

Lady Mary took her from the window, placed her on the hearth rug close to the cheer and shook the rain from her hair. Clothes were found to be wringing wet, so a maid was hastily summoned; these were produced for the tiny visitor's use, borrowed, no doubt, from the old woman at the lodge, whose babies seemed to swarm all over the place. Her pretty hair was dried, and shone now in a lamplight like threads of gold; and a large, grave, wistful eyes—melancholy eyes for a tiny mortal who could not have been more than four years old—lighted up singularly pretty face.

When Lady Mary questioned her as to her name, she would say nothing beyond quaint monosyllabic that no one could understand. "Mig" it sounded like; but a most enlightened English folk could find the little of that.

"I confess it is too much for me," said Lady Mary, who was feeding the child her lap with an abundance of tea and a. "Dear, dear, how unhappy her poor mother must be to-night!"

"I think she must be a stranger's child," said the boy, who was kneeling on the hearth rug and staring at the baby, whose own gaze delighted him. "The servants know every soul in the village; but I don't know her."

"Nan-na!" said the child, glancing at her inquiringly, and then up into the face of Lady Mary, who laughed and used the earnest eyes.

"That doesn't tell us much," she said, as she saw how the child was looking at her. "I wish I could make out her name."

"It should be a marvellously pretty name to suit her," said Lady Mary, gazing tenderly into the little one's charming face. "Why, there, you have christened her!" cried Wriothley, gayly. "She shall be called 'Marvel,' even though it be for this night only. Marvel—bending toward the child—do you like your new name, baby?"

The child nodded her head sagely, and then wriggled off Lady Mary's lap and toddled up to the boy. As he took her in his arms the door was opened, and the maid who had undressed the little wanderer again entered the room.

"If you please, my lady, we found this locket pinned inside the child's dress." As she spoke, the girl held out a flat gold locket, very plain, and rather battered. There was surprise in Lady Mary's face as she took the trinket. She looked at it seriously for a moment, as if hesitating, and then opened it. Inside was the picture of a young man with a handsome, aristocratic, but reckless looking face, and with a dispassionate expression of mockery in his light-blue eyes; the mouth, however, was beautifully formed, and the brow was broad and open.

Having dismissed the maid, Lady Mary glanced thoughtfully from the picture to the child, and then back again. No, there was no likeness.

The morning broke bright with sunlight, and as calm and clear as though the previous night's storm had never been; but it brought to the Towers no anxious mother crying for her child. Day after day, week after week went by, but still the child remained as alone in the world as though she had indeed, as Fulke had suggested, "dropped from the sky."

At last Lady Mary's secret belief that the child had been purposely abandoned was declared by common consent to be the correct solution of the mystery—not cruelly abandoned, perhaps, but designedly placed within Lady Mary's reach by some one who was aware of the clemency and love that adorned her life and endeared her to all the villagers for miles around.

CHAPTER II.

The years passed away swiftly; and, as by degrees servants left or died or got married, and others who were strangers to that part of the country took their places, the event of that night was almost forgotten, and the child came to be considered as one of the family. She was at first an amusement, then a joy, and at last a comfort to Lady Mary, whose health did not improve as time wore on. She took the little one into her inmost heart, and cherished her there without detriment to the love she bore Fulke. In a marvelous short space of time, as it seemed to her, the boy sprang into early manhood, obtained his commission in the Hussars, and quitted the home nest.

Lady Mary took great pains with the girl's education. A governess taught her all the English that a girl should know, and three times a week masters came from town. Marvel accepted them all, and was docile and obedient, imbibing their knowledge with little trouble to herself; but the delight she felt in learning she reserved for such lessons as were given to her by the mother, with whom she was a special favorite. He was unmarried, a student and a book-worm—a strange man who hitherto had been absorbed in himself; but the child took hold of him and dragged him whether he would or not into the warm sunlight of her own young life.

The first knowledge of the world's pain, the first touch of anguish, came to her through Fulke. He sailed for India, and suddenly it seemed to her as if the whole earth had become empty. What a void his going left! He carried with him hope and pride, as a young soldier should, leaving behind him a sad old woman whose every desire was bound up in him and a slender, mournful child, who was hardly to be consoled.

It was early morning of a perfect June day, nine o'clock, but only just been struck with quite a reprehensible waste of time, by the slow old clock in the corridor. Marvel had come upstairs with her aunt's breakfast and "the post," and was now waiting while Lady Mary sipped her chocolate and dipped into her correspondence. She was very feeling now, and quite unequal to rising before noon.

The girl was gazing out of the window, when an agitated voice within the room roused her from her musing. "Marvel, come to me! He is to be here on the nineteenth—a definite line from him—the nineteenth!" cried Lady Mary, in her eager, feeble way.

"The nineteenth!" said the girl. "Why, it is quite close! It sounds like to-morrow; and, after all these long years—oh, it is incredible!"

"Nononsense, dear child! Why, we have been looking forward to it for the last six months."

"I know; and yet it never seemed impossible until now, when it is so near. I wonder"—she hesitated, and then went on—"I wonder if it will be changed."

"Greatly, I mean. It all seems so long ago! When he went, I was only twelve; now I am seventeen, and he must be twenty-eight—quite old it sounds, doesn't it?"

"Quite young, dearest," said Lady Mary, a little sadly.

At that moment one of the servants opened the door, and with a little courtesy to Lady Mary, addressed Marvel.

"Mrs. Bunch says, Miss Craven, that she would be very much obliged if you could come to her to the still-room. She would have come to you, but—"

"I shall be there in a few minutes," said Marvel.

Mrs. Bunch was the housekeeper, and of late Marvel had given all the household directions. The servants—indeed, every one—called her "Miss Craven," that being the Wriothley family name. The poor child had no name of her own, so Lady Mary had lent her one.

Marvel made a sign to the girl, who withdrew.

"Would you like to speak to Bunch now about the room?" Fulke's sister asked. "He will have the old suite, I suppose; but years make things look dingy, and I think the rooms would require—"

to himself—when first he comes; they will seem more like home. Afterward he can manage as he likes." She went nearer to Lady Mary, and, stooping over her, kissed her. "Do you know," she said, slowly, with a pretty childish hesitancy in her tone, "I don't like those words of yours—'man's estate.' Oh, auntie, I wish he were a boy again!"

CHAPTER III.

It was one of the Honorable Mrs. Verulam's musical evenings, and nearly every one worth knowing in town was present.

It was considerably after midnight when a young man, entering an ante-chamber, added yet another to the already numerous assembly. He made his way to where he saw Mrs. Verulam standing in what looked like a cloud of yellow net relieved here and there by a gleam of yellow topos.

"At last!" she said, giving him her hand. "I had ceased to hope—I had quite given you up."

"I had given myself up, for the matter of that," returned Lord Wriothley. "But I knew how to wait, and, as you see, all things have come to me."

"So embarrassed as all that?" said she, arching her pretty brows. "A man so rich is singularly ungrateful when he is a countenance as dissatisfied as yours," she said, laughing maliciously and leaning toward him with an affected air of sympathy. "Who is she then? Can I help you to look for her?"

"Whom should I be looking for? Have I not found you?"

"That suffices, my good cousin. I shall let you off the rest," retorted she, making him a little moue. "We have loved each other too well and too long for that. Yet one more question. Why are you not at the Towers just now? You were due there on the nineteenth—eh?"

"Business, business, business—that most hateful of all things! I fancied myself sure of my leave, or I shouldn't have named the nineteenth when writing to Lady Mary; but the fact is the colonel can't let me off until the day after to-morrow."

Something in Wriothley's face puzzled Lady Verulam. He was not attending to what she was saying, and he was looking over her shoulder at some object behind her. He did not actually start, but an indelible light gleamed from his eyes. It was a light not to be mistaken by so clever a student of human nature as Lady Verulam, and it betrayed him to her.

"Ah, so the lady is here to-night, after all!" she said, slowly, turning her head and looking toward the end of the room, where stood a small group of four or five people.

The party had only just entered, and the central figure stood out from the others rather prominently. She was a tall woman, slight without being thin, clad in an exquisite brocade of an aqua-marine shade. The other members of the group were men, and they seemed to follow her and bend over her with an assiduity that bespoke an eager desire to please.

"So it is Mrs. Scarlett?" said Mrs. Verulam, turning again to her and speaking somewhat excitedly. "My dear Fulke, I can hardly congratulate you."

"Certainly not. It is far too soon," he retorted, with a laugh, purposely misunderstanding her words.

"Ah—so," she said, coldly. "It is of course well to understand how things are going. You knew Mrs. Scarlett in India?"

"For a month or six weeks—a mere moment out of one's life—in fact, I made her acquaintance just before leaving."

"You both returned to England in the same ship, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Another six weeks! Why, you are quite old friends! I have heard that a sea-voyage ripens friendship as swiftly as an Italian suu."

"So have I. It has, however, hardly ripened the friendship you speak of. As yet Mrs. Scarlett and I are mere acquaintances."

"She does not look like any man's acquaintance," said Mrs. Verulam, sagaciously. "Her male friends should be all in or not at all to her, I should fancy—her slaves or nothing."

"You dislike her?" said Wriothley, glancing quickly at his cousin. "I wonder you asked her here."

"As to that, one must follow the fashion; and she is the fashion now. Her fame traveled from India faster than she did, and though we know she was originally only the daughter of a petty country squire, still we are all very eager to get her to come to our houses."

"Her fame?" said he, questioning. "As the cleverest beauty of her time! By the bye, who is that with her now?"

An old man had been the group round Mrs. Scarlett and was shaking hands with her.

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